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8. 'It's for girls really': boys' participation in school-based sex education

Simon Forrest

Introduction

This chapter explores teenage boys' reactions to school-based sex education, and concludes with some proposals for how provision might be developed to better engage them. I have drawn on my personal experiences of the last five years, during which time I have worked in health promotion and in academic research on gender, sex education and sexuality with young people in maintained secondary schools. I refer to incidents, observations, and aspects of empirical research from across this period but do not set out to present the findings of any one study, or to represent all boys. I have chosen instead to place myself firmly at the centre of this chapter and to write about what I have seen and heard and what I feel.

For the most part I have seen and heard massive disappointment among young people about the sex education they receive in school. It is generally too little and too late, not concretely enough about sex, and overlaid with moral proscriptions of which they are suspicious. I have felt increasingly angry about the way public policy in health and education has become less engaged with questions this evaluation raises and more engaged with the pursuit of solutions, at any cost, to a perceived problem with the number of unplanned pregnancies among teenagers. Notwithstanding that not all unplanned pregnancies are a problem, such a narrow focus on the perceived negative outcomes of sexual behaviour seems to operate to the exclusion of any positive messages about sex and sexual experience. Implicitly the sexual behaviour of young people is problematised by adopting this focus. Moreover, because it has become such a clear, appealing and uncontentious rallying point for health and other educators any questions the resistance or reaction of young people raises are swept aside as either irrelevant or the product of ill-informed thinking or underdeveloped morals or emotions. Boys have come in for particular attention in this regard. Their sometimes difficult and challenging behaviour has been perceived, for the most, only as an obstacle to achieving sexual health gains. The questions that their actions and accounts might raise about the meaning of sex and the purpose of sex education have been dismissed. Measurable downturns in the rate of unplanned conceptions among teenagers seem so

important that I feel doubtful that it matters to policy-makers whether the achievement of this goal has any impact on making boys better or happier or more caring and fulfilled lovers.

My interest in boys is nothing new. Moralists, teachers, politicians, lawyers and doctors, chief among other professions, have been concerned about the sexual health and behaviour of boys in Britain for at least a century. For example, Lord Baden-Powell, founder of the Scouting Movement, wrote directly to boys in the handbook *Rovering to success* (which had passed a quarter of a million copies in print by the fifteenth edition of 1930), on the physical and moral risks of masturbation,

... if you do give in to temptation it is very bad for you in many ways. For one thing, it knocks your self-respect; you are doing a thing that you dare not mention to your parents or sisters; you are ashamed; it is something low and unmanly. A man who is ashamed is no longer a man; he becomes a conscious sneak. (1930, p. 105)

The paternalistic homilies of muscular Christian clerics and teachers have frequently connected masturbation with physical decline, spiritual and psychological malaise and sin. Baden-Powell was one of many authors to implore boys to think of their own health and to warn them that the dissipation of their 'seed' was a breach of trust with the seed handed down to them by their fathers and their fathers' fathers. The message that proper male sexuality is heterosexuality and that male sexual potency is connected to racial purity is clear.

Contemporary conservative worries about irresponsible boys impregnating immoral girls are grounded in the same kind of horror of sex and sexuality among young people. However, anxiety about mental stability or racial purity and power has been replaced by political concerns about the financial cost to the public purse of single parenthood. There are strong messages within the political discourse about the perceived sexual morality of young people but these are often subverted by the importation of a new scientific respectability which makes patrolling the sexuality of young people through law and public education reasonable because it is presented as a matter of public health and illness, not of public morality.

One consequence is that there has been a steady increase in the authority of the disembodied and impersonal approach to sexual health education which tries to focus on disease, pregnancy and risks rather than on personal developmental issues. For example, the way that infections spread or the harm they can cause rather than the way that sexual experience and feelings about sex relate to sense of self. This shift in emphasis to seemingly safer territory for teachers to operate in – with facts

rather than feelings or morality – turns sex education solely into a health issue. This presents a difficulty because boys and men tend to perceive education about health in quite negative and proscriptive terms. The relatively poor health of men compared to women implies that constructs of masculinity are themselves in opposition to health. Or, to put it another way, to be a man means rejecting certain health proscriptions. Consequently, the kind of analysis Kilmartin (1994) provides might be seen by many men as an indictment: ‘... males experienced a disproportionate number of childhood disorders ... constituted a majority of substance abusers, sexual deviants and people with behavioural control problems ... More men than women are diagnosed as paranoid, antisocial, narcissistic and schizoid and, of course, men are more likely to commit suicide.’

Blaxter (1986) coloured in some of the meanings which men and women attached to the concept of health and which might suggest why male health is so parlous. She reported that higher proportions of men than women had found health hard to describe. That younger people, especially men, stressed, ‘strength, athletic prowess, the ability to play sports: “fit” was by far the most common word ...’ while women frequently defined ‘physical fitness in terms of its outward appearance ... being (or feeling) slim ... a clear complexion, bright eyes and shining hair ...’ That while men and women often defined health as energy or vitality men often described this as energy for work and women hardly at all: ‘The symbol of energy for women was ... “cleaning the house from top to bottom”’. Women were more likely to define health in terms of good family relationships, and men in terms of functional ability to do ‘hard work’. Blaxter concluded, ‘... women ... gave more expansive answers than men, and appeared to find the questions more interesting.’ This analysis seems to offer insights which might be useful in developing health interventions with boys and men. Of particular interest is the marked importance of functionality of the body in male conceptions of health.

Boys’ participation in sex education

School-based sex education is important. The United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS, 1997) puts the point succinctly, with regard to the prevention of HIV infection, noting that the school curriculum offers a means through which young people can be provided with information and relevant skills prior to the formation of sexual relationships. Also that school-based sex education provides a means through which provision is regularised and made much more nearly universal than it might be if left to parents or communities alone. The guidance to maintained schools in England and Wales on sex education (Department for Education, 1994) seems similarly predicated, opening with the statement that, ‘The Government believes that all pupils should be offered the opportunity of receiving a comprehensive, well-planned programme of sex education during their school careers.’

It is widely accepted that dealing with such fundamental aspects of human relations within the maintained education system is an important facet of the expression of state care for the welfare of the individual and society as a whole. However, providing a mandate, recommending provision and even enforcing a programme does not necessarily lead to the enthusiastic participation of young people. The participation of boys in school education is particularly problematic. As Measor, Tiffin and Fay (1996) have shown, boys may participate, but not in the way intended or desired by teachers. They may preoccupy the teacher's time and energy by subverting the lesson, seizing upon it as opportunity to laugh, joke, be rude or coarse to other students and to denigrate them and the teacher. Measor and colleagues seek to explain this kind of behaviour as the result of complex social and psychological processes in which boys are reacting to culturally proscribed gender roles. By applying gender role theory these authors reach the conclusion that boys repudiate sex education because it threatens their constructs of masculinity. They rehearse a macho response because to admit to ignorance or anxiety about sex is to imply their sexual inadequacy or inexperience. They perform a carnival of extreme macho behaviour, particularly putting down girls and women to ensure their status with their male peer group.

Barbara Walker explores boys' behaviour without recourse to theory (Walker, 1996). She too believes their behaviour flows from a tension, but locates this in their process of development and socialisation. She describes it as tension between public and private faces of the self which become increasingly incongruent during adolescence. She describes the public self as, '... manifested in what you say and what you do. It's an active concept. Private self is concerned with what you think and who you are. So it's a more passive concept. Public self is more concerned with physicality and the private with emotionality.' Here Walker alludes to the importance of the male body in representations of the self. She writes, '... The private self is about health, how you feel,' and, '...the public is about being fit, being seen to play the game – literally and metaphorically.'

Walker too explored the importance of the male peer group. Concluding that the advantages of the apparent brutality – the joking and putting down, must be a sense of solidarity from, '... Learning who you could trust; who would back you up in a crisis.' She also identifies the importance of education (meaning school) as a shifting but ever present territory between the private and public self. She is led to ask herself, looking in on this gaming, '... How well do boys' actions mirror their values?', and '... How far should boys be held accountable for behaviours that may be essential learning strategies?'

The behaviour of boys must damage their own and others' ability to learn from sex education. Recent research has shown that boys are generally less well informed about contraception, and presumably other aspects of sex education,

than girls (Health Education Authority, 1999). Boys themselves do not put this down to their own reluctance to learn, nor to the disruption their behaviour causes to teaching but to the content of sex education and the values expressed. The Sex Education Forum (1997) illustrated this with a quotation from one twelve-year-old boy who described sex education as follows, 'Normally, we are told about things that other people think are important', and that the messages were perceived as mostly negative: 'Don't do this or this will happen.'

What do boys want to know about sex?

Gathering anonymous questions from young people via 'suggestion box' activities is a common approach to assessing their informational needs about a range of health education topics. Frequently I have, like other teachers and health educators, asked groups of young people in school to think of any question they have about sex and relationships, to write it down on a scrap of paper and to place it, anonymously, in a box or bag as a means of providing me with ideas of topics or issues they would like covered in a lesson. Collating similar questions together by sex almost always shows three things. First, there are more questions from girls than boys. Second the questions from girls are written more literately than those from boys. Third, that if collated into categories of similar questions, there are some categories in which almost all the questions are asked by boys and others in which almost all are asked by girls. The two categories in which boys ask the overwhelming majority of questions are to do with the penis and erections and with sexual acts. This is illustrated by drawing on questions from 13- and 14-year-old boys and girls in three co-educational comprehensive schools – a sample of about 500 young people (1997–1999). The eight emergent categories are arranged below from those in which questions from boys predominate to those in which questions from girls predominate.

Almost all the questions about the penis and erections are asked by boys. They ask primarily what the average size of a penis is. The secondary, sometimes supplementary question, is whether their own is adequate in size. They also ask if it hard to get an erection, about impotence and ejaculation.

The second category of questions is about sexual acts. These questions are asked mostly by boys. They ask for descriptions and advice about oral sex, masturbation, and anal sex. They also ask about sexual positions and maximising their physical pleasure from sexual activity and about homosexuality. Chiefly, they want to know how gay men and lesbian women have sex.

The third category, in which almost equal numbers of questions are asked by boys and girls, is to do with puberty. These questions most often seek reassurance about rates of physical development. Typically boys ask about the growth of pubic and body hair and girls about breast size and menarche.

The fourth category of questions is about conception and contraception. Here there is a slight shift towards fewer boys than girls asking questions. Equal numbers are about the signs of pregnancy and conception during menstruation. Others ask about abortion and the relative effectiveness of the contraceptive pill and the male condom. There are questions about the age at which it is legal to obtain or buy both the pill and condoms.

A fifth category of questions relates to the law. These, for the most part, seek clarification about the age of consent to heterosexual sexual intercourse. Boys tend to ask why it only applies to girls and what the chances are of conviction if they have sex with a girl under the age of consent.

Questions in the sixth category are almost all asked by girls and are about pressure from boys to have sexual intercourse. Those in the penultimate group are all asked by girls and relate to first heterosexual sexual intercourse. Fears and concerns about pain predominate. Questions in the final category are all almost from girls and are about discomfort and pain during menstruation.

The greatest number of questions were asked about sexual acts. Roughly equal numbers concerned masturbation, oral sex and other sexual acts and fewer on sexual positions and homosexuality. There were nearly as many questions on conception and contraception, however the range was much more limited. The third most numerous group of questions related to the penis and erections. The least number of questions were asked in the remaining categories and comprise about one-third of the total number of questions.

Of course, collecting questions via this activity lacks social scientific rigour. Not every one asks a question and others probably contribute more than one. Although one can ask young people to indicate whether they are male or female, the activity does not allow for discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, cultural or religious background or class. Also, the activity is an opportunity for some young people to submit questions because they want to amuse their friends or peers or to try and embarrass the teacher. Notwithstanding these limitations and reservations a number of things are clear about what boys want to know about sex, and about what they already know.

The gender differences are remarkably congruent with the analysis provided by Holland, Ramazanoglu and Sharpe (1993) on the context in which men and women learnt about sex and sexuality. The questions tend to show that, as they state, '... The male is regarded as knowing sexual agent and actor; the woman is unknowing and the acted upon.' That, 'normal' heterosexual sex is defined '... as meeting male need and desire,' and that in itself satisfies women, and that women learn what they term a 'protective discourse' which emphasises reproduction over, if not to the point of excluding, sexual desire and pleasure.

Boys want to know about male genitals, particularly their appearance, size and function. They are anxious to feel adequate and normal. They are also querulous about sexual technique, specifically how to perform heterosexual sexual intercourse and other activities. Notably, they seemingly attach little or no importance to the emotional aspects of sexual experience. They want to know how to do it, and how to maximise physical pleasure, but one might think, from their questions, that sex has no emotional context or meaning.

The questions reflect some important presumptions they hold about gendered roles in heterosexual sexual relationships. In the main that sex is a technical act or feat and a repertoire of couplings to be explored by men and, as the girls' questions show, that girls and women have to worry about the health and other consequences.

I believe these presumptions also reflect the general content of sex education which focuses in a strangely disembodied and impersonal way, on human sexual reproduction as a biological act. This leaves a great deal to the imagination which is no doubt informed to some extent by boys' consumption or contact with pornography and mass media images of sex.

Fragile, valuable bodies

Overall, I extract from these questions, and the accounts of boys' behaviour in sex education lessons, the impression that the male body is vitally important in boys' preconceptions about sex and consequently in their perceptions and representations of themselves. As Connell (1995, p. 52) has observed the male experience of masculinity is deeply embodied:

[it] ... is a certain feel to the skin, certain muscular shapes and tensions, certain postures and ways of moving and certain possibilities in sex. Bodily experience is often central in memories of our own lives, and thus in our understanding of who and what we are.

Being male is something felt and lived and displayed. What the male body is like, how it works and its capacities are fundamental to how a man conceives of his identity. However, perceptions of identity in the body are not biologically predetermined. They exist within social constructions of gender which, currently, are strongly differentiated between male and female and rely on assumptions that biological difference signals other kinds of difference: in temperament, capacity and social capital.

The biological basis of gender differences is often used to justify and explain the behaviour of both men and women. This is, paradoxically, increasingly the case at

a time when the body has assumed a remarkable degree of fluidity and plasticity. It is as though the ability of men to look like women and women to look like men has added to the need for boys to feel that a real male identity is achieved in the authentic relationship to their own male bodies. The body has assumed a special value as the basis for identity. It is hard not to be what you look like.

For girls, particularly, the emphasis on being attractive and successful with boys and men has been focused into the achievement of a thin, sexually alluring body-shape. For boys, their masculinity can be stated strongly through being muscular, strong, and physically resilient. Achieving these shapes and appearances brings with it strong gender identity as a man or woman and, as such, has considerable social capital. The ties between labouring of the body and social capital have been steadily eroded with the dwindling of manual labouring occupations which has particularly affected men who may have felt their masculinity affirmed by their ability to work hard, lift heavy weights, toil and labour. New capital is located in the sporting body, valued for its competitive performance, for example. In addition, the material of the body itself has achieved a new kind of capital value. In particular, with the expansion of fertility technologies, human ova, sperm and embryos have worth and may be sold, purchased or given freely.

Schooling boys' bodies

Schooling brings the body into play in a regime where the ability of individual young people to control their self-image and appearance is limited. This has serious implications for how social constructions of gendered bodily difference play out. School presents a range of contexts in which the kind of body to which the highest premium is attached changes. In games lessons, and informal playground games, it is very likely that the bigger, heavier, quicker more mature body is more valuable to boys. This is also the case in the associated arena of the changing room where hairiness and muscularity and penis size may be assessed in relation to and by male peers. The smaller, lighter, generally less mature male body may be more valuable when it comes to avoiding the attention of the teacher. However, because it is often assumed that physical size corresponds to male sexual maturity, in general being bigger is better because it brings more capital in terms of masculinity.

One example is provided by sport in school. Every school field and yard seems to be dominated by groups of boys, usually with a ball, playing at break and lunch-time. The girls are nearly always only left the perimeter of the grass to congregate, and primarily, to talk. The games, which drag on from break to break, are often carefully bounded by rituals of team selection and location. Almost always similar

aged and sized boys play together and the bigger boys have first choice of the various pitches and spaces. In these games important hierarchies of male status are being acted out in which the bigger, tougher, harder-bodied boys always dominate, as Prendergast and Forrest (1998) have illustrated.

Another example, often incidentally emergent during sports and games, is the way in which homophobia is used by boys. Adolescent male heterosexuality is frequently defined negatively, as 'not gay' and 'not girl' (Forrest, 1997). The association made between 'girl' and 'gay' is not accidental. Heterosexual male and female bodies are often constructed by boys as complementary. Male bodies penetrate and female are penetrated. Male sexual desire and activity is hard, thrusting, ready and urgent. Female is softer, receptive, slow to arouse and more passive. They may well understand homosexuality, therefore, as a shift in gender constructs to fulfil these complementary, and apparently biologically essential roles. Hence, they perceive that penetrative anal sex is the central sexual act among gay men as a substitute for vaginal penetration. They also tend to perceive that one gay male partner is receptive and pseudo-female and the other male. The pseudo-female gay man, logic suggests, will take on the gender role as well as sexual role of a woman. His body will be like a woman's – penetrated, passive, and so on. Since women's bodies are generally regarded as weaker and softer than men's bodies, boys can identify a potential gay male body by its weakness and effeminacy: the limp wrist and mincing walk which contrast with firmness and the strutting walk of a heterosexual man. As well as the bodily aspects, it is anticipated that emotional clues will be given off and can be read in the same way. Interest in apparently female school subjects, like textiles or even drama and not liking sport, all become signs of potential or latent homosexuality to the vigilant male observer (Forrest, 2000).

To summarise the main points explored thus far: bodies are important vehicles through which masculinity is shown and felt by boys. The work of Measor and colleagues demonstrates how boys react with displays of sexist machismo to sex education which implicitly threatens their assumptions about sexuality and gender. These ideas seem to be malleable, as are bodies themselves, as Connell shows, and the context, in this case school, in part sets out and proscribes the potential meanings ascribed to bodies. Aspects of the school curriculum, particularly sex education and games, collude with stereotypical beliefs among young people about the added social value of big, mature bodies. In addition, the health agenda, about disease prevention and reproductive control, within which sex education takes place, is not at all congruent with masculine preconceptions about sexual and gender roles. According to these, health and illness and the management of contraception are the concern of girls and women.

Changing sex education

Taking the questions boys ask about sex and their experience of their bodies and sexuality in schools, how can sex education be reoriented to improve their participation? An obvious problem for boys is the almost exclusive focus on managing reproductive sexual behaviour. This brings with it presumptions of heterosexuality as a 'natural' norm and sets up gender conflict about the rights, responsibilities and roles of men and women. One way of countering this is to jettison the teaching of human sexual reproduction as the central aim of sex education and replace it with teaching about sexual identity. Certainly, for boys, this means bringing into the legitimating sphere of formal classroom teaching, the topic of other sexual activities and dealing with the kinds of questions they raise, reported above.

In a practical sense this might mean replacing or at least adding to, the imaginary reproductive human body – the one beloved of textbooks which comprises only sexual organs and responses as they relate to heterosexual sexual intercourse and conception, with real bodies which experience the majority of their sexuality not in terms of organs but of feelings – feelings about the self and the social constructs in which they exist. As Michael Reiss (1998) has pointed out, science textbooks generally ignore notions of the sexual body as a source of pleasure: in his review of fifteen textbooks only two mentioned masturbation. These books also present heterosexual coupling in ways which reinforce unhelpful preconceptions about gender. As Reiss points out, 'Most of the books were sexist in the sense that far more time was spent describing sexual intercourse from a male's point of view than from a female's, while the female reproductive system was covered after the male's. Ejaculation was mentioned in 12 of the 15 books; female orgasm in just five.' He adds, 'Women were mostly viewed as passive (supine) receptacles into which sperm are deposited.'

Addressing real bodies also implies tackling difficult and sensitive issues (and hence those which are often avoided) more concretely. For example, girls' concerns about pain at first heterosexual sexual intercourse. The questions of the kind referred to earlier might be a lever with which to open up the subject of sexual pressure and consent around which these concerns circulate.

It might also be rewarding to look at boys' relation to their bodies in ways which celebrate their sexual potency and attach responsibility to this power. Erik Centerwall (1997) suggests raising the topic of first ejaculation with boys in an equivalent way to addressing menarche with girls. He proposes talking about first ejaculation as a moment of transition to male adulthood bringing with it the possibility, pleasure and responsibility of fatherhood.

Rethinking the approach to teaching about sex in the formal context of the school classroom is clearly necessary too if the excitement and risk inherent in raising these kinds of issues is not to result in disruption and discomfort for both girls and boys. A major objective must be to increase the number of male teachers working in sex education. Boys do not have many models of how men can talk positively about sex in the context of school because so few male teachers teach sex education. The widespread absence of men from sex education teaching only colludes both with boys' sense of exclusion, legitimates prejudices for those who believe it is for and about girls and women, and places women teachers in the invidious position of dealing with sexualisation at the hands of disgruntled boys.

In terms of teaching style and classroom management a more refined differentiation needs to be made between peer friendship groups within classes that acknowledges that these groups are regulating themselves, in part, through the relation of their bodily capital. It is tempting to believe that by stamping on the behaviour of the bigger, noisier, more confident boys, the false premise that bigger is better, inherent in the models of masculinities, will be weakened. This is only to license bullying of boys by teachers. I would suggest one needs to find strategies which enable them to positively display their group solidarity and loyalty. For example, to involve them in role-plays in which they practise support for their male peers by showing how they can share experience or concerns. It is rare for boys to find this easy, but boys do seek help and support from one another and the first goal might be simply to bring that out into the open of the classroom before seeking to educate it.

To talk about sexual acts, in particular, might seem to invite parental or institutional opprobrium. However, as the questions boys ask show, these issues are important to them and often contain the seeds of other, much more important issues which are not otherwise easily accessible. For example, preconceptions about sexual roles and sexual aspirations and fears of men and women, homophobia, the objectification of and violence against women and the obscene vacuity of pornography.

Conclusion

Clearly the relations of men to their bodies and male bodies one to another is a problem in schooling. Currently the character and content of some of the ritualised and taught interactions imbricate sexuality and intimacy and power in ways that are antipathetic to increasing the participation of boys in formal sex education. The durability of boys' bad experiences and difficult behaviour makes it seem as if the possibilities offered to them by feminism in particular have passed

them by. The words B McCall Barbour wrote at the turn of the century (1903, p. 32) still seem a sadly apposite description of the position many boys find themselves in:

It is about this time that the boy who was formerly obedient and studious often becomes restive, dis-obedient and unruly. Boys between the years of fourteen and eighteen are more likely to be disobedient to their teachers ... It is now that sexual passion begins to assert itself. We cannot ignore the fact. To deal with any boy at fifteen and be indifferent to this important change in his life either from so-called 'modesty' or ignorance, is to neglect that which to the boy is the most puzzling of his problems.

This is not either to say nothing has changed, nor that there is something admirable in the Victorian and Edwardian ideal of boyhood. An ideal which was not available to many boys, resting on a rigid class system and reflected only in the writings of middle-class moralists who ignored the pain and suffering their homilies undoubtedly caused many boys. (Barbour produced leaflets and books via a home press for boys. In addition to *A boy at fifteen*, he penned *What's the harm – a word to boys on smoking*, *Letters to lads, not one drop – a word to boys on drinking*, and *Bits for boys*, a quarterly which could be purchased at one-and-a-half pence a single copy or one shilling and threepence per dozen.) However the resonances are profound. For many men, now as throughout the century, their body has represented their chief capital, both in terms of labour and love. It is not difficult to imagine boys and men today uttering the words of Frank Davies (Humphries and Gordon, 1996, p. 167) reflecting on his marriage in the 1930s:

She used to complain that I wasn't very demonstrative. You do all the rest of it, the cuddling and the snogging, but she used to keep saying, 'Do you love me?' And I'd say, 'Of course I do.' But she wanted me to say it and I used to say, 'Well, what's the difference, I'm proving it, I'm showing it. I don't go with anyone else, I'm faithful, loyal what more d'you want? We've got a bank book and we put money in together.' We'd have these kind of arguments. Then now and again I'd blurt it out like, when I'd had a drink.

They have no will or wish to put words where deeds do. Attacks on the articulacy of the male body are seen as attacks on their identity. This chapter argues for opening up sex education, based on the needs of boys, to a reinterpretation of its purpose and meaning with the hope that it might improve their experience, shift their perceptions of health and body and enable them to engage with girls and women and other men in more positive, equitable, informed and pleasurable relationships.

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